

Dog Programs in Prisons – Benefits for Forensic Mental Health

Heather Turney, MA, APCC, C-AAIS

Level

Introductory

Room

CE

CPA/BBS/CJER

Bio

Heather Turney, MA, APCC, C-AAIS currently works as a Forensic Clinician at Gateways Satellite Statewide Transitional Residential Treatment Program. Through the Association of Animal-Assisted Intervention Professionals, she is a Certified Animal-Assisted Intervention Specialist with a focus on animal-assisted therapy for forensic populations in both clinical and research settings. She completed further training in Animal Assisted Therapy through the University of North Texas' Consortium for Animal Assisted Therapy. Heather is also the Founder and Executive Director of Hollywood Huskies, a 501c3 non-profit dog rescue, which, since its inception in 2016, has rescued and adopted out over 1500 dogs. A number of Hollywood Huskies rescue dogs have been trained through the Paws for Life dog training program at Lancaster State Prison, and through this collaboration, Heather has developed an inside perspective on the positive impact of these programs for incarcerated individuals.

Narrative

Growing in popularity since the early 2000s, there are now 290 dog programs in prisons across all 50 U.S. states. This presentation offers an inside look into how these programs work with an emphasis on how they improve the mental health and overall well-being of the incarcerated individuals who participate. The introduction will give an overview of the three main types of dog programs in prisons: dog training programs; visitation programs where participants pet and play with dogs without formally training them; and animal-assisted therapy (AAT) programs in which dogs are incorporated as part of treatment conducted by a mental health professional. Other topics include: the origin and evolution of dog prison programs; an analysis of direct and indirect mental health benefits; how to assess the appropriateness of dog interactions for specific forensic clients based on risks, cultural considerations, and other factors; an in-depth description of the Paws for Life dog training program at Lancaster State Prison; and, an analysis of research, including a discussion of recent research findings and research limitations. Attendees will assess how these prison programs create a positive life-changing experience for those behind bars— humans and dogs alike.

Learning Objectives

1. Identify and describe the three main types of dog programs in prison
2. Assess the mental health benefits of dog interactions for individuals who are incarcerated
3. Describe the origin and evolution of dog programs in prisons
4. Differentiate appropriateness of dog interactions for forensic clients based on risks, cultural considerations, and other factors
5. Analyze dog prison program research findings and research limitations